



Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels

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Gretchen Schwarz

Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels

Gretchen Schwarz offers a rationale, based on the need for current students to learn multiple literacies, for the use of graphic novels in the high school English class. She highlights several titles, suggests possible classroom strategies, and discusses some of the obstacles teachers may face in adding graphic novels to their curriculum.

Time has arrived to broaden the canons of traditional education and the curriculum. . . . Using critical pedagogy to integrate the new forms of visual and electronic “texts” represents a curriculum requiring new competencies and a new definition of what constitutes learning as well as how and when it takes place.

—Laudislaus M. Semali, *Literacy in Multimedia America: Integrating Media Education across the Curriculum*

T

he graphic novel now offers English language arts teachers opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy. The *graphic novel*, a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a “real” book, is increasingly popular, available, and meaningful. Library media specialists have been in the forefront advocating graphic novels. For example, Maureen Mooney declares, “If you acquire graphic novels, young adults will come.” Mooney

adds that graphic novels appeal to various readers, offer all kinds of genres, help students develop critical thinking, and encourage literacy (18). Literary critics are also taking note. Lev Grossman observes, “Yet some of the most interesting, most daring, most heartbreaking art being created right now, of both the verbal and visual varieties, is being published in graphic novels. These

books take on memory, alienation, film noir, child abuse, life in post-revolutionary Iran and, of course,

love” (56). In addition, *Standards for the English Language Arts* promotes a wide variety of texts, “print and nonprint,” facility with “visual language,” and participation in a “variety of literacy communities” (NCTE and IRA 3). The time has come for secondary English teachers to explore and use the graphic novel to build multiple literacies.

First, the graphic novel is helpful in promoting the goals of traditional literacy. Getting students reading is one benefit, as literacy expert Stephen D. Krashen argues in his latest edition of *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Educators have also urged the use of comics as an alternative, appealing way for students to analyze literary conventions, character development, dialogue, satire, and language structures as well as develop writing and research skills. Rocco Versaci maintains that graphic novels can “increase and diversify the voices that our students experience in the classroom and suggest to them that literature may take various forms” (66). Such study can even encourage students to question the notions of the canon. Timothy G. Morrison, Gregory Bryan, and George W. Chilcoat describe how creating graphic novels in class can help middle school students “develop their writing, comprehension, and

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research skills in a cross-curricular activity" (759). Phyllis Hartfiel, a mid-high teacher from north-eastern Oklahoma, includes the graphic novel in her study of *Romeo and Juliet*. Hartfiel has her ninth-grade students create a graphic-novel version of the play that allows them to communicate what they thought most important and that serves as a good review. Hartfiel thinks that this playful approach to Shakespeare requires students to solve problems and make decisions about such literary elements as narrative style and character presentation. The students also create a rubric for evaluating the graphic novels they produce, under the teacher's direction, requiring further critical thinking.

Even at the college level, Martin Wallen, an English professor at a major state university in Oklahoma, has used the graphic novel *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell in a popular-fiction course based on Jack the Ripper literature. He chose the book not because it was any graphic novel but because it is one of the best and fit the course topic. Wallen noted that *From Hell* "takes the lurid sensationalism that has always surrounded the Ripper murders and turns it into a self-conscious commentary on our fascination with violence and lurid sensationalism. . . . It enabled us to talk about the exploitative aspects of sensational literature and cinema." His college students responded well, and *From Hell* is not an easy book to read. Not only is the story long and sometimes confusing, with flashbacks, hallucinations, and visions of the future, but the research footnotes in Appendix I run forty-two pages. Moreover, the black-and-white drawings capture the somber setting of lower-class London at the time of Jack the Ripper, and the violence and sex are fairly graphic (not appropriate for younger students). *From Hell* is a well-told and disturbing, thought-provoking work, what any English teacher would want from any work of literature. Traditional aims can be served by using the graphic novel in the classroom; the graphic novel can be legitimate literature.

Increasingly, scholars and teachers realize that in a media-dominated society, one traditional literacy—reading and writing of print—is no longer sufficient. Today's young people also have to read films, TV shows, magazines, and Web sites. Both practical information and the stories of our culture come from many media, especially those made possible by current technology. Donna E. Alvermann and Margaret C. Hagood argue, "As a result of the

greater demands that students face in New Times, they must acquire the analytic tools necessary for critically 'reading' all kinds of media texts—film, video, MTV, the Internet, and so on; hence, our interest in incorporating critical media literacy in school curricula" (203). Both traditional, alphabetic literacy and literacies such as information, visual, and media literacy can be well served by classroom engagement with the graphic novel.

The graphic novel is a medium that combines the visual and verbal as do films, TV, and even pop-up ads. The graphic novel, however, holds still and allows special attention to be given to its unique visual and word arrangement. As Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons declare in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, "There is a synergy between words and pictures in comics such that their combined effect is greater than or different from what might have been predicted" (xiv). To read and

interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style. For example, I shared the short story "Hurdles," from a graphic novel collection by Derek Kirk Kim (available online at <http://lowbright.com/Comics/Hurdles/Hurdles.htm>), with a group of adults in the Language, Literacy, and Culture doctoral seminar. The discussion of this short piece revealed the complexity and sophistication of this literary medium.

Kim's "Hurdles" is, some students claimed, a poem. In fact, the way the words are laid out on the page next to the pictures rather than in the usual speech balloons, the rhythm of the narrative, and even the repetition of the first and last sentences add to the poetic quality of this short piece. Other elements also come into play. The black-and-white artwork and the title "Hurdles" styled as hurdles on a race course add to the serious tone. The perspective is telling. The school boys are just running legs in one panel, and the protagonist is looking up to the coach in the third-to-last panel. The coach has great power over these adolescents.

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HURDLES

I jump hurdles every day. While everyone else on the track team runs straight through, my fellow hurdlers and I go up and down, up and down. Some hurdlers jump over the hurdles, and others kick them down. I jump over them.



Sometimes I'd like to just kick them out of my way, but I guess I'm just too polite. But who cares, I can cross the finish line and that's all that matters. Besides, my coach says either way is just fine.



We call our coach "Pear-Nose". There's always a pair of black sunglasses atop that nose of his. And he always stands with his hands behind his back. Now that I think about it, I've never seen his hands. Maybe he doesn't have any hands, I don't know.



Reprinted by permission of Derek Kirk Kim.

The coach himself is just a pair of sunglasses on a nose, holding still, closed off. He is not portrayed as a fully human figure, and his ignorant racism is reflected in his stance. Of course, the hurdles as physical barriers also become the symbolic barrier of prejudice for the boy. Much more could be discovered and discussed in this piece; its effect is visceral, through the combination of words and pictures. As the American father of the graphic

novel, Will Eisner, observes of the medium, "It is in every sense a singular form of reading" (5).

Some graphic novels, and the term includes all genres, are designed to inform and persuade. New media call for a "new rhetoric," one that includes visual as well as verbal understanding and ability, as demonstrated in *Visual Communication: A Writer's Guide* by Susan Hilligoss. This handbook, aimed at college students, acknowledges that new

He drove us especially hard this one particular practice before a track meet with a rival high school. We circled the track, around and around, endlessly. Anyone who stepped off that beaten track was punished with more laps.



Finally, I couldn't go on anymore without water, so I parted from my lane and ran to the drinking fountain.

When I turned around, Pear-Nose was staring down at me.

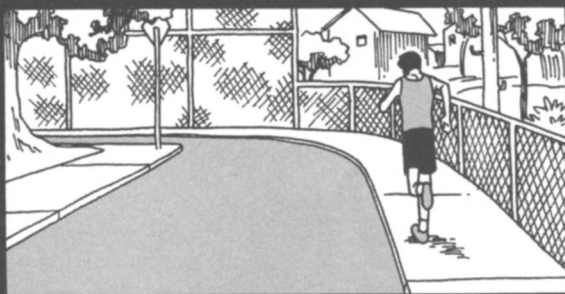


How did you know?



Then he told me to run back onto the track. I started to run. I ran through the grass, past the baseball field, out of the main gate, and straight to my house.

I jump hurdles every day.



technologies make the *visual* design of documents significant. Hilligoss summarizes as follows: “[C]ollege students . . . prepare their work with sophisticated computers and printers that rival the output of commercial printing. . . . They have access to a wealth of graphics via the Internet and inexpensive collections of clip art, as well as the means to create digital photographs and artwork. They make pages for the World Wide Web and effectively publish their work to a large audience. . . .

In short, the world of college writing has changed” (1). Younger students likewise read and create arguments and do research in ways beyond simple print. The graphic novel offers an engaging medium for asking students to analyze information and persuasion in different ways.

For example, Joel Andreas's *Addicted to War* is a graphic novel heavy on verbal text that is a manifesto aimed at American militarism. Well supported with statistics and references, *Addicted to War* combines

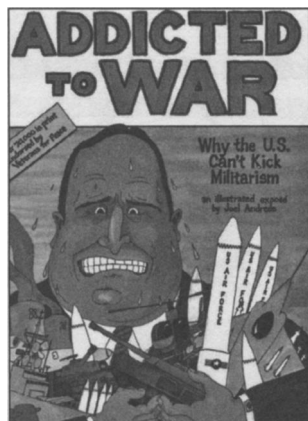
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cartoon pictures with black-and-white photographs and covers its topic from the first chapter on Manifest Destiny through the Cold War and the “War on Terror” to the last chapter, “Resisting Militarism.” *Addicted to War* does not aim to give a neutral, textbook view but rather to persuade the reader that American militarism is wrong. The Korean War is mentioned on page 13 in two panels, one showing a cartoon General MacArthur boasting about American might (with obscenities indicated) as the text describes the “ambitious plans” of the US State Department to show that Western technology could defeat “any Asian army.” Certain key phrases such as “ambitious plans” and “revolutions and anti-colonial wars” are in bold text. The second panel shows a photograph of American soldiers fighting in a village and a cartoon skeleton saying, “Waiting for another war,” while the narrative text describes the death statistics and notes that the United States did not win this war. This graphic novel is not subtle, but such a work offers a good place to begin to analyze visual along with verbal persuasion. Students should ask who the target audience for *Addicted to War* is and who is not the audience. How were the photographs chosen? How do the cartoon figures affect the reader, especially the satirical figures? How were the facts chosen and connected? What is the effect of the list of antiwar organizations at the end of the book? How does the lettering affect the reader? Other graphic novels take on current events, versions of historical events, even other media. Today's young people need the knowledge and skills to deal with persuasion in an age of images.

Finally, the graphic novel offers teachers the opportunity to implement critical media literacy in the classroom—literacy that affirms diversity, gives voice to all, and helps students examine ideas

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and practices that promulgate inequity. Many graphic novels offer more diverse voices than traditional textbooks and can open up discussion about issues such as social justice. For example, *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904–1924* by Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama, translated into English by Frederik L. Schodt, portrays the struggles of four Japanese immigrants. *Manga* is the Japanese term for graphic novel, and the medium has a respected history in Japan. This narrative is both funny and disturbing as the four men work hard to become successful in their new home but suffer injustices and prejudices. Interestingly, Kiyama, as Schodt observes in the introduction, does not adhere to the American convention of the time of “drawing obsequious Japanese with slanted eyes and buckteeth (later with glasses and eventually cameras added)” (16). In its narrative and in its visuals, this graphic novel is a challenge to stereotypes and a new medium for examining such concepts.

Likewise, *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans* challenges assumptions about the poor, victim blacks, who actually accomplished much while surviving slavery and racism (Laird and Laird); this book would work well to connect the English class to history. A graphic novel such as *Dignifying Science: Stories about Women Scientists* challenges the notion that scientific discoveries have been made by all or mostly males, making it a good book to connect to science classes (Ottaviani). The illustrations were all done by women artists. Graphic novels can not only be used for encouraging critical media literacy but also for encouraging cross-curriculum connections.

The work of one middle school teacher near Tulsa, Oklahoma, Carrie Edwards, illustrated the potential for graphic novels in celebrating diversity. Edwards brought in graphic novels as they supported her seventh-grade language arts course. For example, certain manga that are quite popular with middle school students include elements of Chinese mythology, such as warrior figures, which fit a unit on mythology. Even the form of the manga—which usually has to be read from back to front, from the American perspective—offered Edwards the opportunity to compare Japanese and American culture. Manga and other graphic novels

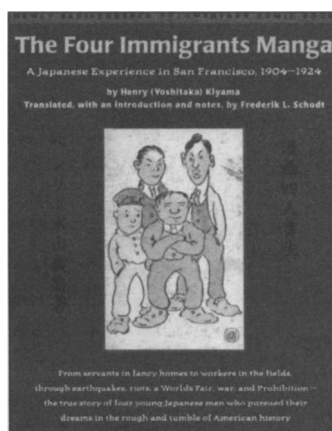
can also offer situations to which adolescents can relate, as in *Fruits Basket*, in which one girl is a “rice ball” and does not fit. Graphic novels present issues of difference and belonging, according to Edwards, and students enjoyed reading them, discussing them, researching them online, exploring animated versions of novels, and drawing characters and scenes from these books. The manga “open up so many things,” said Edwards, enabling the exploration of multiple literacies.

Using graphic novels in the classroom does present a challenge to teachers; a number of obstacles and concerns arise. First, anything new often faces resistance, especially if it is part of popular culture. Finding classroom-appropriate works is also a concern. Not all graphic novels are appropriate, and even some of the best contain profanity and sexual and violent content. Teachers will need to apprise their principals and parents of their plans and be able to offer a good rationale for using specific graphic novels in their courses. Censorship remains

a problem around the country, and many educators, too, are loath to encounter any controversy in the classroom.

Second, graphic novels are not on the state or national tests. The alignment of curriculum and standardized testing is a growing problem, especially given the demands of legislation such as No Child Left Behind. Moreover, new literacies may not be widely accepted nor included in the district or school curriculum objectives. The current political climate is not particularly supportive of innovation. Even obtaining funding for graphic novels may be difficult.

Finally, teachers themselves will have to do their homework. Teachers must extend their ideas about and skills in multiple literacies; media literacy or critical literacy may not be familiar concepts. Fortunately, there are excellent works that



can help teachers new to the field of graphic novels. For the beginning reader of the medium, Stephen Weiner's *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* and Michele Gorman's *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* offer many useful titles and helpful background information. Both Weiner and Gorman are library media specialists. Much information about various titles and where they can be obtained is also available online. Second, several titles offer excellent insights into the ways graphic novels work on readers: *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud (in graphic novel form), *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* by Robert C. Harvey, and works by Will Eisner. One can also find information online from librarians, publishers, and from teenagers themselves. In addition, new books are coming out, such as *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel: Everything You Need to Know to Create Great Graphic Works* by Mike Chinn, that can help teachers and their students create graphic novels as well as read them. One of the advantages of graphic novels for the teacher is their freshness, and the teacher and students must work together to make meanings and to explore multiple literacies.

Graphic novels are increasing in number, quality, variety, and availability. They offer a new kind of text for the classroom and they demand new reading abilities. They tend to appeal to diverse students, including reluctant readers, and they offer both great stories and informational topics. For students who no longer deal with pure word texts in their daily lives, multiple literacies are a necessity. Schools must prepare young people to think critically with and about all kinds of texts.

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